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National Implementation Plan for the Communications Task Force Report

"Improving Communications and Working Relationships"

Contents

3 Message from the Chief

4 Bringing the Message Home

5 Approach

6 Strategy I

8 Strategy II

9 Strategy III

11 Strategy IV

13 Strategy V

14 Accountability

15 Appendix I
Process for Plan Development

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF

When the Communications Task Force Report was released, I encouraged Regions, Stations, Forests and Districts to begin implementing the many actions identified at all levels of the organization. While some of these actions required policy changes, many others merely required a strong personal commitment to enhance communications — individuals just needed to do it! As a result, a variety of efforts have been started to implement the report, and more are coming on-line daily.

My new challenge to you is to take these successes and expand the scope to enhance our communication efforts, internally and externally. It is my belief that only through effective communications will we be able to implement our vision of a changing Forest Service, one that embraces ecosystem management and a multicultural organization.

This is one of the most important of the challenges and opportunities we face as we move into the 21st century.

F. Dale Robertson, Chief, USDA Forest Service

BRINGING THE MESSAGE HOME

The Communications Task Force Report recommendations, were accepted by Chief and Staff in January, 1991. Stations, Regions and the WO immediately began to follow up on several of the recommended actions. However, there was no systematic approach to the handling of many of these actions and in some cases, no action on any recommendation was taken.

The Deputy Chief for Administration, Lamar Beasley, decided to re-visit the Communications Task Force Report to determine if a service-wide call for action was needed. This evaluation resulted in the formation of a task force to review and make recommendations on a process for action.

Since 1983 there have been eight different reports dealing with communications or public affairs with little follow-up or action taken. In order for this report to be useful there must be commitment from the highest level. That means regular reinforcement by Chief and Staff, Regional Foresters and Directors to all employees. It means holding ourselves accountable. More importantly, it requires that all employees think of themselves as members of the Forest Service public relations team.

Public affairs develops and maintains effective two-way communications with many publics on whom success or failure depends. Highly effective internal and external communications must become our established routine. This plan emphasizes national level activities; however, there are many actions that must be done at the Region, Station, Area, and local level. It's up to every one of us to make a difference — **AND COMMUNICATE.**

APPROACH

This Implementation Plan has been structured to re-visit the original Communications Task Force Report and crosswalks the proposed recommendations with the stated actions. Each strategy from the Report is restated and the actions identified, although some have been merged to reflect integrated action items. (Items are cross-referenced to actions in the original report by [TF Report: X]). Following each action, we then identify an implementation task, either one already in place or one the task force is recommending be initiated. The tasks identified as already underway at Regions, Stations, Area or the WO are not intended to be a complete list, but to be representative.

The recommendations which are new initiatives are designed to improve the focus and effectiveness for implementing the Communication Task Force recommended actions at the national level. The recommended implementation actions can all be accomplished within three years. In addition, FS management should review the recommended actions from the original Communications Task Force Report for implementation.

Finally, as one reads this Plan, it becomes obvious that there is considerable overlap with other efforts and other task forces designed to move the organization in new directions (e.g. Multicultural Report; Accountability Task Force, Mission/Vision Working Group). It is imperative that these efforts be tied together and linked to the mission/vision principles. As we move forward to implement the Communications Task Force Report, we must recognize and incorporate other pieces to make the whole.

STRATEGY I.

Forest Service Mission, Strategy and Vision

A shared sense of mission is essential to our collective efforts to improve communications. Our objective is for every member of the Forest Service to have a clear understanding of our mission, strategy and vision and to use this understanding to guide their day-to-day work, and to be able to adequately describe it to the public.

Actions:

1. Review all national statements relating to mission/vision principles and update or revise. Once developed, the mission/vision must be conveyed and shared with all employees. [TF Report: A - C]

   - A Mission/Vision Working Group, chaired by the Deputy Chief for Research, Jerry Sesco, was chartered by the Chief to prepare a mission/vision statement for Chief and Staff. The group is currently in the process of completing their report and will develop a strategy for taking the mission and vision message to all parts of the organization. The Mission/Vision Working Group has the identification and articulation of a common message as a primary goal, and is developing principles which can be communicated throughout the organization.

   - Develop a marketing strategy that ensures the mission/vision principles are conveyed, shared and understood by all employees.

     - Target Date for Action: 10/92
     - Responsibility: Chief and Staff

2. Incorporate an understanding of mission/vision into new employee orientation. [TF Report: D]

   - Target Date for Action: 5/93
   - Responsibility: Personnel Management

3. Develop standardized regional training for all employees to increase understanding of how and why the Forest Service operates. [TF Report: E]
Ongoing

The Deputy Chief for Administration shall evaluate and then provide the necessary resources and staff to accomplish a basic orientation program for all new employees. While such a program exists in some Stations and Regions, it is not consistently utilized and does not adequately target key information gaps. This effort should be:

a) given highest priority within Administration and WO PM;

b) not limited to WO implementation;

c) addressed to all employees regardless of series, grade or length of service;

d) standardized, including all facets of FS operations, history and culture of the Forest Service, issue management, organizational structure with emphasis on coordination of Deputy Areas and public affairs;

e) coordinated with Multicultural Task Force recommendations on training and development; and

f) made available to current employees who have never received an orientation program.

- **Target Date for Action: FY 93**
- **Responsibility: WO PM lead using small core group from all FS staff areas**

STRATEGY II.

Internal Communications

Within the Forest Service, we will improve teamwork and cooperation based on open two-way communications, timely sharing of accurate information and recognition of top communicators. We must manage technology so that it improves our internal communications, but we must recognize that technology is no substitute for face-to-face dialogue.

Actions:

1. Require first-line supervisors to discuss issues and share critical information with their employees. This communication must be done to facilitiate interaction and exchange of ideas. Inherent in this action is the recognition that internal dissension may exist due to different values and attitudes — effective communication must acknowledge these differences. [TF Report: A - C, E, H] Re-emphasize need with all first-line supervisors. Review current policies for adequacy, then revise or develop policies at Region, Area, and Station level.

   - Target Date for Action: 4/93
   - Responsibility: RF & D

2. Acknowledge and reward outstanding communicators. [TF Report: D]

   - Present the Associate Chief's award for internal communications annually following a national competition. **Ongoing**

   - Present the NFS award for communications to individual/staff group in WO annually. **Ongoing**

   - Continus scientist-of-the-year awards at most Stations and at the WO; emphasize publication record in criteria for selection. **Ongoing**

3. Evaluate current internal communication tools. Where appropriate, improve methods to communicate sensitive information. [TF Report: F]

   - Charter an Information Resource Management (IRM) Executive Team to develop information management strategies for the Forest Service. (The IRM Team report "Information Management: A Framework for the Future" was approved at the 1992 Winter RF&D meeting.) **Completed**

   - Evaluate all public affairs products (e.g. newsletters, videos, brochures) to determine if they are being used effectively and related back to agency goals and objectives. Develop a policy establishing the criteria and guidelines for implementation and use of these outreach products as a result of developing the 9/92 public affairs corporate planning. (See **Strategy V #4**)

   - Target Date for Action: 6/93
   - Responsibility:WO Public Affairs Office lead with evaluation panel of users/customers

4. Formalize and require a transition process between line and key staff officers and those who will be replacing them. [TF Report: I]

   - Develop a national policy on the transition process between key personnel at the time of transfer, retirement, etc. in order to communicate issues from current to future employees. This effort includes developing a process for exit interviews for all employees.

     - Target Date for Action: 10/92
     - Responsibility: WO PM

STRATEGY III.
External Communications

Before public communications can be substantially improved, the Forest Service, at all levels, must resolve that effectiveness in public communications is as important as anything else the agency does, and must demonstrate that resolve by committing the resources necessary to do the job. Skilled external communications will be viewed as a valuable part of our overall effort because it is the foundation for building trust and supportive working relationships.

Actions:

1. Strengthen and promote a view that every employee in the Forest Service must be an effective communicator of our mission and vision, and develop special training for "frontliners" who work directly with the public. Provide career opportunities and improve tenure for "frontliners." [TF Report: A - C]

   - Evaluate NFS's "People Serving People" and "Good Host" programs, considering whether they should be broadened to all Forest Service activities or restructured. These programs should be tied to Total Quality Management efforts already underway; targeted to all employees, line and staff; incorporated in Research and S&PF; and designed to improve the quality of community contacts.

     - Target Date for Action: FY 93
     - Responsibility: WO PAO and Deputy area staffs

2. Require opinion leader lists at every organizational level. [TF Report:D]

   - Evaluate policies on the development of contact lists for external communications of programs and redirect as appropriate.

     - Target Date for Action: 12/92
     - Responsibility: WO Staff Directors, Regional Foresters and Station Directors

3. Emphasize and reward community involvement. [TF Report:E]

   - Continue a variety of local efforts—"Power of 10," "Hi Neighbor," etc. **Ongoing**

   - Provide a national award for outstanding rural development efforts.

     - Target Date for action: Annually
     - Responsibility: Deputy Chief, S&PF

4. Require targeted communications plans that focus on key themes or issues. Evaluate outreach opportunities through environmental education, interpretive services and similar public contact venues. This effort should include greater effort to explain rationale of decisions and policies. [TF Report: F,G,I]

   - Establish a National Natural Resource Conservation Education Program in WO S&PF. **Completed**

   - Charter a Legislative Affairs National Task Force to better coordinate legislative affairs efforts in the Forest Service. (A final report was released on January 21, 1992 for internal FS use and an action plan has been developed.) **Completed**

   - Re-establish program management responsibility for public participation and conflict resolution at WO, RO, and Stations, consistent with previous positions in PAO which were eliminated with the WO Public Affairs reorganization.

     - Target Date for Action: FY 92
     - Responsibility: WO, RO and Station PAO

5. Emphasize partnerships at every level of organization, including expansion of ongoing efforts (e.g. Challenge Cost Share, Stewardship, Land Management Planning) and contacts with universities and other federal and state natural resource agencies. [TF Report: J,K]

   - Review efforts regularly and re-evaluate success and capabilities within each program.

     - Target Date for Action: 12/92
     - Responsibility: Deputy Chiefs, Regional Foresters and Directors

STRATEGY IV.

Communications and Public Affairs Professionalism/Skills

The communications and public affairs efforts of the Forest Service will be based on professionalism and a high degree of modern public affairs skills. These skills will be fully utilized to meet the public's need for timely and relevant information, to build strong working relationships and to support the Forest Service mission. Additionally, line managers and staff need a working knowledge of public affairs. We should foster appreciation and recognition of the professionalism of public affairs employees and incorporate these skills into management team activities at all levels of the organization.

Actions:

1. Develop and standardize basic communications and public affairs training requirements for public affairs professionals. [TF Report: A]

   - Develop R-9's "College of Public Relations" training program for public affairs specialists and line and staff officers has been developed. Offer a two week curriculum of a variety of courses to enhance communications/public relations skills. **Completed.**

   - Identify skills and competencies needed for public affairs professionals in the Forest Service.

     - Target Date: 9/92
     - Responsibility: WO PAO

   - Identify and develop a series of public affairs courses. This series should not be developed from "scratch" but should use existing resources (either within FS or external) as appropriate (for example, building on the success of the Region 9 "College"). Employees requiring personalized course development are:

     a) new public affairs employees from other FS disciplines or assignments;

     b) new public affairs employees from positions outside FS;

     c) current PAO's (continuing education in advanced public affairs skills as well as other areas of FS operations); and

     d) line, line candidates and staff (introduction to public affairs, public participation and conflict resolution).

     - Target Date for Action: 12/92
     - Responsibility: WO PAO and PM

2. Update the publications "Public Affairs Skills for the Developing Manager" and "Professional Development Guide for the Public Affairs Officer" and incorporate into personnel process as basic skill guides. [TF Report: B]

   - Review the publications "Public Affairs Skills for the Developing Manager" and "Professional Development Guide for the Public Affairs Officer." (WO and R-5 PAO have reviewed; revision and update are not necessary.) **Completed**

   - Develop national policy to incorporate the use of "Public Affairs Skills for the Developing Manager" and "Professional Development Guide for the Public Affairs Officer" in the selection and evaluation of managers and public affairs officers. Guidelines could be used for knowledge, skills and abilities in position descriptions and as selection criteria (see Appendix III. & IV. for Guides).

     - Target Date for Action: FY 93
     - Responsibility: Deputy Chief, Admin

3. Make basic communications and public affairs training mandatory to hold managerial and public affairs positions. Managers should be evaluated and selected with these skills as minimum qualifications, commensurate with an increased priority on good communications skills. [TF Report: C, E]

   - Develop a proposal to establish public affairs training goals for managers, to be submitted to Chief and Staff for input and approval.

     - Target Date for Action: 4/93
     - Responsibility: WO PAO and PM

4. Strengthen qualifications and standards for the 1035 Public Affairs series. [TF Report: D]

   - Work with Office of Personnel Management to strengthen the qualifications and standards for the 1035 series and require a professional background. The "Professional Development Guide for the Public Affairs Officer," should be used to guide this effort.

     - Target Date: 9/93
     - Responsibility: WO PAO and PM

STRATEGY V.
Focus and Efficiency of Communications and Public Affairs

Communications and public affairs efforts will be fully integrated into the decision process at all levels. The public affairs program direction must shift from a focus on individual activities and resource areas, to a targeted approach, where the emphasis is on reaching clearly identified audiences with well-planned messages that support the overall Forest Service mission. The purpose of the following recommendations is to develop the infrastructure for conveying the Forest Service message in this manner.

Actions:

1. Assure that public affairs specialists are full members of the management team, involved in the decision making process at all levels of organization. Evaluate managers' and line officers' use of public affairs expertise and hold them accountable for meeting their communications responsibilities. [TF Report: A, B]

   - Review current practices for ensuring effective communication.

   - Target Date for Action: Immediately
   - Responsibility: All Line Officers

2. Design and implement an organizational structure that promotes teamwork. This would require top line officers to approve and participate in annual public affairs objectives and strategies, consistent with and supportive of national communications objectives. [TF Report: C, F, G]

   - Convene a working group to examine the function and structure of Public Affairs. This group should:

     a) determine role of Public Affairs. This assessment should not be simply a statement of mission, but should be a clear analysis of function and structure within the Forest Service, including how best to deliver interpretive services, environmental education, special initiatives and public affairs messages; and,

     b) identify key personnel/organizational characteristics to redeem role and responsibilities.

   The working group should be convened at a high level, comprised of two Deputy Chiefs, two Regional Foresters, one Station Director, one member of the original Task Force, and one representative from WO PAO. An external consultant, qualified in the area of public affairs and communication, should be used to coordinate and facilitate this process. This effort should proceed as a partnership with Public Affairs, both in the WO and in the field offices; they have the professional skills and insight needed to accomplish this task and can assist in identification of alternative approaches.

   - Target Date for Action: 10/92
   - Responsibility: Deputy Chief, Admin

3. Achieve consistency in public affairs staffing and career ladders across the organization. [TF Report: D]

   - Recommendations for action are shown under Strategy IV.

4. Develop corporate public affairs planning to establish roles and responsibilities of public affairs across the organization. [TF Report: E - I; and Strategy IV. F]

   - Undertake a Forest Service corporate communication planning effort, including an assessment of current capabilities and needs. The process should be ongoing, with interim guidelines developed.

     - Target Date for Action: 9/92
     - Responsibility: WO PAO

ACCOUNTABILITY

"Improving Communications and Working Relationships," the report of the Communications Task Force, was not seen or received by many field offices after it was approved. This implementation plan offers another opportunity to achieve wide distribution of both the original report and this Plan.
The Committee recommends the following:

1. The Chief re-emphasizes the importance of this effort at family meetings, RF&D, and other appropriate occasions.

2. The Chief transmits both the original report and this Implementation Plan to all line officers and staff directors with the direction to share it with employees and evaluate what actions should be taken within their unit. Each location is encouraged to review the actions identified in the original Communications Task ForceReport and implement those relevant to the location.

3. The Director of Public Affairs in WO has the lead and overall responsibility for implementation, including:

   - monitoring completion of recommendations as per the target dates,

   - creating a feedback system from field PAO to Director on issues and on status of actions and recommendations.

   - submitting a semi-annual report to the Chief on the completion status of each recommendation with copy to RF&D, and

   - adding responsibility for Communication Task Force Report implementation as a performance element in performance standards for the Director.

APPENDIX I
PROCESS FOR PLAN DEVELOPMENT

An interviewing process was conducted to determine the extent and expectations of a national implementation plan and to identify areas of overlap with other efforts. Key members of the original Task Force were interviewed and several WO employees were asked to review and comment on the report. A meeting was held in the WO with the specialists involved to discuss the comments received from these contacts. A draft plan was prepared from these discussions.

Using the draft plan as a starting point, a Committee of field and WO representatives was selected to prepare the final draft implementation plan. The Committee met on October 22 & 23 in Washington, D.C. The final draft was sent to all the people involved in the interviews, to additional contacts in the field and WO, and to the Committee for a last review before it was presented to the Deputy Chief for Administration.

Interviewees	**WO Specialists**	**Implementation Committee**
Jack Alcock, R-8	Susan Rutherford, Rec	Barbara Beck, R-1
Bruce Jewell, R-8	Tom Clifford, LMP	Art Bryant, WO
Susan Hess, PAO	Lou Woltering, InS	Allen Gibbs, R-1
Hank Montrey, RM	Gary Elsner, Rec	Bruce Jewell, R-8
Doug MacCleery, WO	Art Bryant, Rec	Steve Marshall, WO
Ann Matejko, PAO	Chuck Myers, R-9	Sherri Richardson, PNW

Ann M. Bartuska, Chairperson
Dave Miller, Co-chairperson

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